

The lost art of the Amiga shovel-em-up

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

They don't make games like they used to... *thank Miner!*

The Amiga platform was notorious for its lame-duck arcade game ports. Some of them bear so little resemblance to the source material they're hardly recognisable as such. If you take into consideration the back catalogue of output as a whole, certain patterns begin to emerge which allow us to pinpoint precisely why they were so dire.

Limited finances meant that only a privileged handful of developers and publishers were in a position to forge instrumental relationships with the Japanese copyright holders of coin-op IPs, so licenses to produce the home micro versions would almost by default be awarded to the same teams. Ocean, Domark, GO, U.S. Gold, ICE, Tiertex, and Tengen would always be riding high in the hall of shame roster of repeat offenders. If they weren't up to the task and

failed to learn from their blunders, the lack of quality would be pervasive across the board.

Scraping the bottom of the barrel for inspiration, some of the worst examples include Street Fighter, Rolling Thunder, E-SWAT, Thunder Blade, Pitfighter, UN Squadron, Altered Beast, Chase HQ, Outrun and Rambo III. The goal predominately was to knock together a vaguely close approximation of the original game in as short a time frame as humanly possible, usually to coincide with the lucrative Christmas holiday season, during which parents would buy any old tat as long as they recognised the A list star gurning on the box cover... or their offspring - if they didn't read a reputable Amiga magazine - would reflexively stick games on their wish lists if they enjoyed the cabinet they wrestled with in Blackpool.

Producing games that were actually *fun* to play was barely an afterthought. Securing the ready mix promotional buzz surrounding an iconic TV show, movie or coin-op was the order of the day as it almost guaranteed record-breaking sales volumes.

Tiny teams of developers would be drafted in and expected to produce a finished product within a totally unrealistic schedule. Shoddy workmanship permeates a project from the top down; under enormous pressure, developers cut corners and games weren't sufficiently bug tested. Nonetheless, if unscrupulous magazine critics could be coerced into publishing favourable reviews, it would all work out in the end, and profit margins would ensure the whole cycle repeats ad infinitum.

Translating a game designed to run on dedicated, far more potent hardware to a bedroom 'toy' didn't help matters. Sprite sizes had to be slashed, frames of animation dropped,

the number of colours stripped back to the bone, and sometimes even entire levels or pivotal characters were omitted to fit everything into 512k of RAM, and on a single floppy disk.

Comparatively speaking, console ports would often fall from the conveyor belt smelling of roses because they were allocated far more generous budgets and reasonable timetables in which to complete them. Critically they were undertaken by larger teams of developers, and under ideal circumstances, ported by the same developers who created the original coin-op source code, and knew the games inside out and backwards.

Also, key to their superiority, you could argue that the SNES and Mega Drive hardware offers a closer correlation to your typical coin-op machine in that a greater proportion of code can be executed via hardware channels as opposed to the less efficient software routines engaged by the Amiga.

What transpired on the computer side of the equation was that games were first ported to the lowest common denominator, the Atari ST, and from this shaky foundation to the more capable Amiga, resulting in a dilution of potential finesse.

"One button is enough", so says the t-shirt, but is that true where arcade ports are concerned? Yes and no. It works fine for less taxing games where 'up for jump' feels like second nature to an Amiga gamer.

Smushing Street Fighter II's six-button arrangement into one was more of a challenge, and not one that was especially successful if you ask a fan of the SNES or arcade version.

Any game that utilises two joysticks, one to aim your weapon and another to manoeuvre the protagonist or

vehicle around your environment would demand another fudgey compromise.

The 'lock and unload' mechanism in Midnight Resistance kind of works. You hold down the fire button to freeze your character and then swivel the joystick to rotate the arc of your gun, except you often end up jumping in the direction you'd rather only shoot towards, and this can result in getting up close and personal with an adversary unnecessary. Regardless, it remains an exemplary testament to competent arcade ports for the Amiga.

It's a shame developers were hamstrung in this area at all because the Amiga, despite appearances, is perfectly capable of employing a second button. Most games weren't designed to use it, however, because the majority of controllers on the market were wired to interpret all buttons as the same instruction.

Coding games to cater for minorities didn't make economic sense so developers tended to take the path of least resistance approach, although some *would* allow you to choose to engage a second button option through a menu configuration screen if it wasn't already enabled by default e.g. Apidya, Fire & Ice, Flashback, Leander, Mortal Kombat I and II, Mr Nuts, all the Turrigan games etc. Alternatively, there was the space bar - *some* developers had heard of it back then. Our Amiga port of Galaxy Force wasn't quite what you would call 'arcade perfect'. I can't imagine why the developers might have struggled to translate the ambience of this beauty. ;)

If you'd assumed that buying the license to port a coin-op automagically granted the developers unfettered access to the original source code, or even the ROMs from which the data could be painstakingly extracted, you'd sadly be way

off the mark. More likely they'd be forced to buy the PCB themselves and convert the hardware-based solely on their experience and observation of playing the game.

Graphicicians would take hundreds of analogue photos of the action, or record it with a VHS video camera, and use this primitive media as reference materials when composing their sprites, backgrounds, animation and so on from the ground up.

In one case I'm aware of, the artist lifted sprites from photographs by tracing their outline onto acetate, which was then taped against his workstation screen in order to transpose the detail into pixels.

Audio could be transcribed in an analogous 'reverse engineered' manner using cassette recorders, so the corollary delivered was somewhat an interpretation of the original attributes rather than a meticulous facsimile.

Whilst Nintendo and SEGA determined which games passed their rigid quality control assessment, Commodore had no such measures in place for regulating software releases. In effect it was a case of 'anything goes'; the consumers and critics adjudicated and if a game's appraisal tarnished the reputation of the host brand then so be it. Let's not kid ourselves though that there wasn't a skip load of dross available for the consoles too, despite this vigilance. No filter is impeccable and much criticism is of a subjective nature. In any case, how reliable were those green light decisions likely to be if a boardroom chock full of out of touch executive money-men were calling the shots?

The dreaded moniker, 'arcade port', shouldn't be synonymous with 'atrocious cash-in', and it *isn't* necessarily. Some of the all-time Amiga classics fall into this camp; Pang,

Toki, Rainbow Islands, New Zealand Story, Golden Axe, Midnight Resistance, Rodland, Bubble Bobble, R-Type, Silkworm. Far too many sublime conversions to list here, that's for sure.

It serves to demonstrate that talented developers, given a reasonable time frame in which to apply their craft, are perfectly capable of producing coin-op ports to be proud of, ones that you wouldn't hesitate to adopt in showcasing the Amiga platform.

They don't have to be pixel perfect clones to pass muster either. What's crucial is gameplay - are they fun to play? Do they keep you coming back for one more go? If the graphics and sound push the system's boundaries, that's the cherry on the cake, but it's not the end of the world if they don't. Bedroom gamers realise compromises go with the territory - they made the biggest one when they spent a few hundred pounds on a desktop computer rather than thousands on an arcade cabinet!